Promoting Religious Freedom During the Campaign Against Terrorism": Martha Brill Olcott Prepared Testimony

November 27, 2001 The Inadvertent Impact of an Accidental AllyThe new US military presence in Uzbekistan is one more sign of how the dominant geopolitical paradigms of the last half of the twentieth century are no longer operative. The Cold War and its aftermath post-Cold War period are at an end.The US-declared "War on Terrorism" may not define the new paradigm that will emerge, but it will certainly have an impact upon it, redefining the fates of nations, like those in Central Asia, that bear neither direct nor indirect responsibility for the heinous attacks on the US. The successes and failures of this campaign will influence the way in which seemingly isolated bits of the world will fit together. These are also countries with keen rivalries, especially between the Soviet-era communist leaders that still dominate the region's potentially wealthiest or most powerful states-especially Nursultan Nazarbayev of Kazakhstan, and Islam Karimov of Uzbekistan. The presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have become fierce competitors, each vying to be the most powerful figure in the region.Until recently it looked like Nazarbayev was "winning." Kazakhstan's vast on-and offshore oil deposits were attracting international investment, and this, combined with the leadership's partial embrace of economic reform made it appear as if the country was about to take off economically. With aspirations to be a global actor of consequence, Nazarbayev had long touted Kazakhstan as a bridge between Europe and Asia, and Pope John Paul II's decision to visit Kazakhstan's new capital of Astana as his sole stop on his first trip to the region in late September 2001 seemed partial confirmation of this.

By contrast, the Uzbeks were having great difficulty in advancing their claim to be the "heart" of Central Asia. The Uzbeks share borders with all four Central Asian states, and have a large diaspora population in each as well. Limited economic reforms, combined with the difficulties in repatriating profits from a country that lacked a convertible currency, meant that Uzbekistan was attracting far less foreign investment than Kazakhstan was, and in general was failing to capitalize on its geographic advantage by becoming a regional market. In fact, the region was failing to coalesce. Fearing the infiltration of Islamic elements, Karimov closed off the Uzbek borders, and cracked down hard on any sort of potential political opponents at home.However, the arrival of the US in the region, may give Karimov another chance to right his economic and political mistakes. We do not yet know how much and what kinds of US assistance has been promised to the government in Tashkent, but at minimum it seems likely to include a marked increase in US military assistance to Uzbekistan. This assistance is likely to be sufficient to change the strategic balance in the region and would make Tashkent's goal of becoming the region's preeminent military power within the next decade a realistic one.Karimov's Second ChanceWhile the strategic interests of the great powers on Central Asia's borders need not be strongly affected by the US foray into the region, Uzbekistan's neighbors will certainly feel that their future security might well be compromised by the almost inevitable increase in Uzbek military capacity that is likely to result. President Islam Karimov has long believed that it is Uzbekistan's destiny to dominate the region.Neighboring leaders have long viewed the statue of Tamarlane that the Uzbek leader had erected in a downtown square was an indirect warning to them. Now they fear that US weapons will fuel Uzbek ambitions. But as the current situation in Afghanistan is showing, security voids are as dangerous as the actions of bullies. Karimov's neighbors fear the ripple effect from potential domestic disturbances within Uzbekistan as much as they do the consequences of any future Uzbek aggression.At the same time, there is much disagreement between the Central Asians and western observers as to what constitutes the preconditions of public order in the region.Certainly, Uzbek president Islam Karimov believes that a strong security force is the key, and that it must be used to wipe out existing and potential enemies, which in his mind include all devout Muslims who reject the right of the secular Uzbek state to define the parameters of their faith, including naming the clerics who will lead their congregations.Most of Central Asia's leaders endorse most or all of Karimov's strategy, although they do not pursue it as ruthlessly or as vigorously. The Hizb ut-Tahrir party, part of a world-wide movement to restore and Islamic caliphate as the only "righteous" government for Muslims, is barred in Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan as well as Uzbekistan. Although the adherents of this movement do endorse the seizure of power through violence, their aims are seen as definitely seditious, and their cause is equated with that of the violent Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, whose members have been linked to Osama bin Laden's Al-Qaida network.Most western observers feel that this strategy is a very risky one, because repression in the absence of widespread economic and political reforms simply creates an unending source of new recruits for religious and other extremist organizations. This is especially true in a country like Uzbekistan, where over half of the population is under the age of 21, and most of these people live in the countryside where educational and economic opportunities are diminishing.Few political leaders get a chance to right their decision-making wrongs, but President Islam Karimov may well get one for his willingness to host the American troops. Uzbekistan discontinued its macrostabilization program in 1996, but now the IMF and World Bank may be willing to reengage with the Uzbeks on more generous terms.The Uzbek president will be making a grave mistake if he fails to take advantage of this opportunity, for Uzbekistan's once powerful Soviet-era economic elite is also growing more restive with time, as they look with envy on how friends and relatives in neighboring countries have been able to use the economic opportunities provided by the reform process to accumulate personal fortunes. If the dissatisfaction of this group is not addressed, then they could make common cause with the country's Islamist elements, particularly if they were to perceive President Islam Karimov to be faltering. Given Karimov's success in obliterating any independent secular movements in the country, there will really be no other force for the elite to ally with. We have already seen a similar pattern in Iran, in the late 1970s, which helped facilitate Ayatollah Khomeini's seizure of power.Uzbekistan's Islamic HeritageUzbekistan's Islamic heritage is quite different from that of Iran; for one thing its population follows the Sunni tradition and not the Shiite one. But Uzbekistan's long history is intimately connected with religion, and with the struggles of Sunni Muslims to define their

relationship to the basic teachings of their faith. Islamic fundamentalists have contested the power of Islamic conservatives here for hundreds of years, well before the Russians gave any thought to even trying to capture this territory. The nature of the struggle changed over time, depending upon who represented the religious establishment locally, and what sort of global trends existed among Islamic fundamentalists.During the Soviet period this struggle was muted, but did not disappear, and today's religious activists trace directly from those active in Uzbekistan on the eve of the Bolshevik Revolution. As with so many other Muslim countries, Uzbekistan's religious revival has a regional component, and centers in the country's Ferghana Valley, which also juts into Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and has a decisive role on religious life in these two countries as well.As a Soviet-era ruler, Karimov is still strongly influenced by the social engineering approach to religion and social evolution more generally that predominated among the elite that he grows out of. In addition, the Uzbek president comes from a different part of the country (Samarkand) and was raised in a Soviet orphanage, so he had little experience with the type of traditional society that dominated in his part of the country. Most who are close to Karimov, also came from secular Soviet families, and so also view religion with suspicion.So there is a temptation to underestimate the staying power of Islamic groups in Uzbekistan, and it would be a bad thing if the US inadvertently bought into the current Uzbek strategy. For public order to prevail in Uzbekistan, eventually there will have to be some limited power sharing with Islamic elements, and at minimum the community of Muslim believers must again be permitted to be largely self-governing, as they were in the beginning of the 1990s.The Shifting Sands of Central AsiaIf Uzbekistan's government does show more tolerance toward Islam, and embraces economic reform, and gets increased military assistance from the US, then it will be one country that will certainly gain from the tragic events of September. Of course Karimov's gamble could fail. He might refuse to reform, or permit some economic reform, and then refuse to let economically empowered elites have increased opportunities for political participation. In this case it is highly likely that someday his population will turn on him, and Uzbekistan's support for the US would become another potential weapon in their arsenal.This is especially true if the US withdraws from Afghanistan before the country is fully stabilized, for then it will only be a matter of time before Uzbek opposition groups again find easy refuge there. The failure to adequately address the reconstruction tasks in Afghanistan could also quickly destabilize the already fragile government in Tajikistan, and even the somewhat stronger one in Kyrgyzstan. Both states would suffer from the growth in the opium and heroin trade that chaos in Afghanistan would stimulate. Whatever the end-game in Afghanistan, the geopolitical situation in Central Asia is likely to change, either subtly or not so subtly, depending upon whether peace prevails in Uzbekistan. Disorder in Uzbekistan threatens all of its neighbors. If economic reform were now to succeed in Uzbekistan the country would be both well armed and able to easily dominate the economies of the weaker states of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. And although both would try and seek support from Russia, beyond continuing to secure the Tajik-Afghan border, the Russians are likely to offer little else to these two small states, as they add very little to the commercial empire the Russians are trying to build.The Uzbeks pose less risk to the Kazakhs. The move of the Kazakh capital to the center of the country, from Almaty to Astana (formerly Akmola) was largely designed to make a statement to the Russians. It has the additional effect of insulating the Kazakh government from any spillover effects originating on their southern borders with Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. Kazakhstan's most valuable assets are in the north and the west, far from these borders.The rise of Uzbekistan will not make the Kazakh leadership more submissive. It is far more likely to leave the angry and feisty, more determined than ever before to turn their country into a global actor of some consequence. Uzbekistan lacks the diverse and rich resource base that gives Kazakhstan some potential economic clout. The Uzbeks have cotton, and gold; they can produce foodstuffs and have enough oil and gas to meet their own needs and to ship into southern Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. But with the exception of cotton, none of these assets are valuable worldwide.By contrast, Kazakhstan's oil and gas deposits are significant, as are their reserves of a number of strategic metals. Land-locked Kazakhstan cannot stand alone, but if its plans can be made to coincide with those of Russia, whose assets are even more significant, the two countries can both prosper in a way that shows little concern for developments to the south. It is one of the great ironies of globalization that New York and Washington are at greater risk from Afghanistan-based terror groups than nearby Almaty and Astana. So it is really incumbent upon US authorities that we "get it right" in Uzbekistan and in the other Central Asian states, and not just in Afghanistan.In this regard: Thus US should continue to pursue a policy of promoting human rights, including the pursuit of religious freedom in this region. There is a natural tendency to back off from direct criticism of the domestic policies of war-time allies, and in this regard while US troops are using Uzbekistan as a launching pad for military actions in Afghanistan the Bush administration may not be pressing too hard on the human rights abuses that are prevalent in Central Asia in general and in Uzbekistan in particular. However, although we may choose to remain silent on some of these human rights abuses at the moment, we must send clear signals that this silence should not be misinterpreted as acquiescence. The US government should make sure that silence is only a short-term strategy. In the medium and long-term we must send clear signals to the Central Asian states that the promotion of human rights and the protection of religious freedom is very much a US priority. The best way to do this is to make explicit but more effective linkages in our foreign assistance program. The US should demonstrate that these states are important to us by increasing the amount of developmental assistance available to them. The thrust of our increased assistance should be in the area of economic reform, with strong attention to rule of law and protection of property. But at the same time we should establish a series of benchmarks in human rights, including in the area of religious freedom, which are necessary to be met if this assistance is to be continued. It is very important that we target both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The latter is closer to being mired in political chaos than the former, but the consequences of societal collapse in Uzbekistan are much more profound. If creatively used, the US-led Campaign Against Terrorism gives US policy-makers some valuable new tools to use in the promotion of human rights, including religious freedom. This is especially true of the intelligence cooperation in the area of financial terrorism. Religious groups that are not formally linked to those engaging in terrorist activities should be able to gain legal registration, and their members should not be persecuted. In this regard a great deal more could be done to minimize the

self-financing capacity of extremist religious groups in Central Asia through a more systematic crackdown on the drug trade which originates in Afghanistan. The US should use religious freedom as a tool in the Campaign Against terrorism in Central Asia. The Bush administration has gone to great lengths to argue that the Campaign Against terrorism is not a campaign against Islam. However, in much of Central Asia the local governments are engaged in the systematic persecution of religious believers, defining as revolutionary all devout Muslims who reject the right of the state to define the content and limits of religious belief. As long as Islam is under pressure in parts of Central Asia, those who preach its most extreme doctrines will enjoy the status of national heroes, and they will have no difficulty finding new recruits among the disaffected youths to fill the places of those who are arrested.